DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 381 CS 206 914

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TITLE Creative Research: Getting Students to Take Charge.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco, CA, March 18-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Thinking; *Data Collection; Higher Education; Models; *Research Projects; Student Experience; *Student Motivation; *Student Research; *Teaching Methods; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Research Papers (Students)

ABSTRACT

Far too many students handle a research assignment through the tear and glue approach, a wholesale--though usually not quite so literal--copying of materials from books followed by a heavy handed plastering of the foreign material into their papers. Their papers are foredoomed to mediocrity or worse. By overstressing the dichotomy between critical and creative writing, teachers have overlooked the creative dimension of doing research. Overcoming students' feelings that their experiences cannot possibly yield insights valuable enough to write about is an essential step toward having them take a more active command of their material. The following techniques can help students see themselves as creative researchers putting information together in new ways for specific purposes and audiences: (1) introducing students to media models that combine personal voice and experience with secondary sources; (2) asking students to take stock of their prior knowledge on a subject and incorporate their personal experiences into their research papers; (3) heightening their awareness of the malleability of facts by designing exercises to show that the same facts can support different, even opposing, points; (4) encouraging them to use interviews as a source of information; and (5) having them cope consciously with their audience. (HOD)

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CREATIVE RESEARCH: GETTING STUDENTS TO TAKE CHARGE

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CREATIVE RESEARCH: GETTING STUDENTS TO TAKE CHARGE

In ENGLISH: THE PRE-PROFESSIONAL MAJOR Linwood Orange points out that among the skills taught in English courses which lead to professional success are "the ability to use research materials with creativity and originality" and "the ability to analyze, interpret, reorganize, and rephrase material."[1] Though other disciplines are certainly involved in developing these skills, we in English are supposed to lay their foundation. Most of us regularly face long weekends inching our way through stacks of research papers, often with sinking despair. For teaching research skills is probably the most challenging and frustrating part of our jobs. The research paper assignment is clearly in trouble--painful for us as teachers, traumatic for our students. To help our students write more effective research papers, we need to understand the nature of their trouble and to explore ways of overcoming their problems.

The experience of one of my colleagues last semester underlines the magnitude of our task. She graded some art history term papers for a faculty member who was ill and found that between 60 to 70% of them were to some extent plagiarized. One student had even gone so far as to rip color reproductions from the college library's art history books to illustrate her paper. That incredible act is, I believe, emblematic of the way far too many students handle a research assignment: the tear-and glue approach, a wholesale-- though usually not

quite so literal-- copying of materials from books followed by a heavy-handed plastering of the foreign material into their papers. We have all suffered through reading the results: infuriating patchwork papers--strings of direct quotations and inadequate paraphrase linked together by the weakest threads of transition. Their secondary material remains barely digested, unfocused, often plagiarized.

The problem is as deeply rooted as it is pervasive: students often come to us with bad habits and frames of mind resulting from the poorly conceived writing assignments they encounter from elementary school on. An assignment my daughter faced in the fourth grade is a good example: she labored over a twenty-page report which was supposed to "cover" ten significant Virginia events and ten important Virginians--one page on each. Faced with such tasks, children learn early to assume that they know nothing relevant about their subjects; they learn to be global and general, to fill up space at random, to let their sources dictate what they say. Taking their cues from the assignments and instructions they receive, they head straight for the library where the rows of stacked books seem to have a paralyzing effect on their brains, perhaps by confronting them with crushing evidence of all they do not know. Desperately, they start reading about their subjects usually in general surveys or in encyclopedias, perhaps (but only perhaps) narrow their topics a bit, then start taking notes. Like the student who once told me that she planned to begin work on her paper by going to the library to find a few articles on her topic so she could decide what to say, they start with no clear purpose in mind and quickly feel

overwhelmed by their material.

Their papers are foredoomed to mediocrity or worse. For instead of thinking of their sources as means of supporting what they want to say, they see their task to be that of sticking together, in no particular context, what others have already said. Out of such a process writers may acquire additional information but not likely new insights. At best, such students stop at what Linda Flower has termed "writer-based prose" where "the writers' organizing principle is dictated by their information not by their intention."[2]

Even students who manage to do better than that-- who produce well-documented, carefully organized but lifeless and mechanical papers-- need to move to a higher level of achievement. For students often become "fossilized" at certain achievement levels as Helmut Esau and Michael Keene note in a recent COLLEGE ENGLISH article which compares acquiring writing skills to learning a new language. Among the similarities they note is the students' decision at a certain point that they know enough and therefore can stop learning.[3] As is so often the case in acquiring a new language, they end up saying what they can say rather than what they want to say.

To help students break their old patterns and to move them to college-level writing skills once they have become stuck at a lower level, we need to do more than berate them for their laziness and dishonesty. Before they undertake their research, we must effect a major

attitudinal shift so that they see themselves as responsible for actively shaping rather than passively gluing their material together. To do so, we must tap their creativity. For research worth doing and worth reading is creative activity. We have compartmentalized too much, making sharp distinctions between creative writing (highly intuitive, emotional, and personal) and research (dry, objective, and remote from the writer). In THE MAKING OF MEANING Ann Berthoff cites as a misconception the idea that "creative and critical writing are entirely different, that they require different brain halves, different skills, different 'behaviors,' different cognitive processes, different slots in the English curriculum."[4]

By overstressing the dichotomy between these two kinds of writing, we have overlooked the creative dimension of doing research. We should teach our students to expect the thrill of a creative surge not only when they write poems and short stories but also when they make connections between two or more of their sources or between their own ideas and those they find in their sources. We need to help them become explorers rather than pedants painstakingly accumulating data whose interrelations remain unilluminated by their intelligence. Berthoff suggests that to produce such a shift it is necessary to rescue the imagination from "the Affective Domain."[5] "Reclaiming the imagination begins with recognizing it as a name for the active mind," she maintains.[6]

The starting place lies in activating the writer's sense of self as capable of meaningful insight, in actualizing the implications of

Thoreau's important reminder at the beginning of WALDEN: "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking."[7] I have found the following techniques do help to produce a shift toward a more active approach to research. I use them all within the framework of a junior-level Report Writing course where the final objective is an eight-to-ten-page professional report for a specialized audience. But though the end product is a piece of objective writing, students must begin by taking personal command of their subjects. As Allan Brick insists, "Topics and issues must be meaningfully focused; ideas <u>are</u> ideas because they have been personally engendered, personally validated, because their implications and the result of their expression have been faced personally."[8]

To awaken students to the importance of trusting their own experience even if it seems insignificant, I have found a short essay by Faye Moskovitz to be an effective teaching tool. Moskovitz recounts how she had always felt her stomach sink at the prospect of writing that predictable school essay on summer vacations because, unlike her classmates who had taken exciting trips, her summers trickled away while she played at her father's junkyard or just hung around the house and neighborhood. Her richly detailed evocation of those endless childhood summers provides a springboard for leading students to see that what impeded Moskovitz as a child was not the raw material of her experience but rather her attitude toward it. For what she did not then consider suitable for a school essay finally appeared in <u>The Washington Post</u>.

Overcoming the feeling that one's own experience cannot possibly yield insights valuable enough to write about is an essential step toward taking more active command of one's material. We need to actively convince students that making connections between the subjective and the objective enhances rather than undermines their credibility. Models from the media like "The More You See the Rich, The Less Enviable They Seem" by Henry Fairlie and "Black Woman, White Man" by Michel McQueen show students that they can effectively combine personal voice and experience with a variety of secondary materials like statistics, cases, and citations from authorities. McQueen, for example, first explores the personal pain involved in interracial dating; then she enlarges her discussion by placing her plight in a historical and cultural framework.[9]

Once students accept the idea that they may and should use their insights and experience even in their research papers, I urge them to engage in some brainstorming and free writing activities before they start foraging in the library. For the sequential, career-related assignments which I developed with my colleague Deborah Fort, the first step is always a journal assignment in which students try to recreate as vividly and intensely as possible their own remembered experience with the topic they have chosen without worrying at first about what it means or what it proves. For example, in the job satisfaction sequence, if a student plans to write her long report on the problem of teacher burn-out and its possible solutions, she begins by recalling her own teaching experiences, however limited they may be. Here are

a couple of excerpts from the journal of one student, a freshman from Belize who had taught in her native country:

> The buzzer sounded, cutting me off in mid-sentence. The girls jumped up clamoring, "Miss, Miss Lindo. Don't go yet. Tell us more about Henry the Eighth." I grinned. "Something wrong, girls? Since when have you been so excited about history class?"

After recapturing more of the dialogue, she concludes:

> As I left the classroom, I thought: Was it really worth it? Staying up until almost three in the morning, poring over textbooks and encyclopedias so I'd know what I'd be talking about, then making notes and reviewing them so I could hold my class' attention for forty minutes. Was the tired feeling after an almost sleepless night worth the look of excitement on the girls' faces when they could visualize events that took place centuries ago? Was it worthwhile working my tail off just to see a spark of interest ignite and shine in their eyes? Yes! Definitely! I had done a good job and I knew it! Hurray for me!

Buried in this journal is a valuable resource that this student can tap for her report on teacher burn-out. But after students have vividly recaptured such an experience, the next problem is helping them analyze and make sence of it: they need to achieve some distance,

to ask themselves what inferences they can draw from it. Miss Lindo, for example, needs to recognize that the problem on which she should probably focus is that of discovering what stands in the way or wears away the kind of adrenalin-generating experience she had with teaching. Surprisingly, without encouragement from the instructor, most students do not even think about what their own experience has taught them about their subject; they plunge right into their research. To assure that students do not bypass their own experience, I have begun requiring, at least for their first papers, that they choose topics for which they can use at least one supporting example derived from personal experience or observation.

Students also need to realize that their experience does not speak for itself, that it constitutes raw data requiring interpretation. A classroom incident last semester provided a natural opportunity for making that point. Trying to distinguish between a journal and a traditional paragraph, I remarked that, unlike the paragraph, the journal does not need to have a point or focus. The following brief journal entry from a previous student served as an illustration:

> "You can't come to my birthday party; my mother said so, "a fourth grade classmate of mine said. We were suddenly the center of attention in the school yard. She gloated over my discomfort. "Why not? "I managed to whisper. "Because you have no father," she answered with satisfaction. "I do too

> have a father; he doesn't live with us, but I have one," I replied hotly. "My mother says that people who get divorced are bad and and don't believe in God, and you can't come." I broke away from the group of giggling girls and ran home. My mother promised me a private birthday party with cake and ice cream just for me, but that didn't take the hurt away. "It's your fault; I hate you," I screamed.

When one student observed, "Even if the writer didn't state what her point is, we all know what she's saying," I asked each student to jot down what she thought was the writer's point. The responses were varied enough to convince even the doubters that such raw experiences do not speak for themselves and that writers must take conscious care to direct their audience's responses if they want to be sure of communicating successfully.

This semester the same passage served a similar purpose: that of making students aware that their experience has the meaning that they attach to it. After watching the second segment of Bill Moyer's creativity series, I adapted an exercise used to spur children's creativity: showing them an object and asking them to think of as many uses for it as possible. Using the birthday party journal again, students generated as many topic or thesis statements as they could think of which this incident could support. Here is what they came up with:

Children can be cruel.

Mothers do not like having their children befriend children from broken homes.

Children from broken homes resent their parents.

Birthday parties are a big issue for fourth graders.

Mothers often try to heal emotional wounds with sweets.

Mothers cannot always relieve their children's misery.

Children from broken homes suffer.

Being friendless can make one feel miserable.

Mothers are constantly the objects of blame.

Anger is sometimes directed at the wrong person.

Being excluded is very painful.

Mothers pass their own prejudices on to their children.

Children are vulnerable to having their feelings hurt.

By the time the class had finished, it was easy for me to point out that a fact of human experience does not necessarily have meaning in itself; like raw scientific data, it requires a shaping intelligence to give it meaning.

Once students become aware that they must analyze and be critical about their own experience, they can practice applying the same processes to materials they encounter in their research. Statistics, for example, provide excellent supporting evidence in a research paper, but they tend to tyrannize students. Not only must students learn to interpret statistics and to use them honestly and clearly, they must also learn to embed them in a supporting context which points to their significance rather than leaving them standing naked and unexplained.

To overcome this weakness, students need to realize that, like their own raw experiences, facts are malleable. The same fact can make many different points, even opposing ones. For example, the fact that a management consulting firm reports that "clerical workers are unproductive at least four hours of the normal eight hours spent on the job"[10] does not speak for itself. A writer could use this information to argue that American businesses will increase productivity only by increasing automation, that businesses are failing to motivate their employees, that clerical workers are seriously dissatisfied, that supervisors need to be more vigilant, or that instituting a shorter work week will not neccarily decrease worker output. Similarly, the fact that the number of freshman women choosing education as a major dropped from 38 to 10% between 1969 and 1979[11] can argue that more women now choose non-traditional majors, that schools may soon suffer from a lack of qualified teachers, that only the truly dedicated now select a career whose job possibilities have become severely restricted, or that women have become more materialistic and less willing to play nurturing roles in low-paying jobs. Giving students such facts and asking them to work inductively from them to more general statements drives home the realization that facts are not absolutes but rather malleable material to be shaped to suit the writer's purpose.

Another effective way of underlining the writers' need to control their materials is to encourage them to use interviews as a source of supporting information. Interviews provide several advantages for this purpose: first, they subtly remind students that, after all, the au-

thorities they are quoting from books are just people analyzing and making meaning rather than remote, enshrined gods; second, they force students to plan ahead and to frame questions likely to elicit the desired information; and third, because interviews usually produce information in a less organized and polished fashion than written materials, they require students to confront more directly the problem of having to impose their own patterns on the information they obtain.

Finally, having students consciously take the audience's needs and attitudes into account also helps them take active command of their material. At least initially, using their classmates as audience works well. In "The Case Approach to Composition" David Tedlock argues that telling students to write for their classmates does not go far enough in making them aware of their audience's needs because that is too much like writing for themselves.[12] Yet classmates do have an advantage over figures invented for cases: they are there. One way of making students come to grips with the characteristics of their classmates as audience is to spend some time making its features explicit. For instance, at Marymount we establish that the audience is mostly female, mostly Catholic, mostly white middle-class, and mostly young adult and then we explore what those features imply.

After a general discussion about the nature of the audience, students provide each other with specific input concerning the attitudes and amount of background that they bring to a particular subject. Thus,

the one man in my Report Writing class profited from knowing that, contrary to his expectations, his audience was not entirely against drafting women. A student preparing to write about discrimination against foreign students in American universities learned that American students often resent what they perceive as clannishness among foreign students. Another student whose subject was anti-Semitism profited from recognizing that the group had a textbook familiarity with the topic but thought of it as a problem of the past. Explicit rather than imagined audience reactions help inexperienced writers plan more effectively. Even better, such input provides the teacher with a non-threatening reason to suggest appropriate revisions; students are more receptive to the instructor's advice when a paper, though advancing valid arguments, does not adequately address the expressed needs and attitudes of the audience.

These techniques-- introducing students to media models that combine personal voice and experience with secondary sources; asking that they take stock of their prior knowledge on a subject and that they incorporate their personal experience in their research papers; heightening students' awareness of the malleability of facts by designing exercises to show that the same facts can support different, even opposing, points; encouraging students to use interviews as a source of information; and having students consciously cope with their audience-- these techniques still leave students a great distance from the polished, focused, controlled reports we would like to read. But they do combat mindless passivity and set students at their tasks in a frame of mind from which good results are possible. They help students see themselves

as creative researchers putting information together in new ways for specific purposes and audiences.

ENDNOTES

[1]Linwood Orange, English: The Pre-Professional Major (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), p.8.

[2]Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English 41 (September 1979), 26.

[3]Helmut Esau and Michael Keene, "A TESOL Model for Native-Language Writing Instruction: In Search of a Model for the Teaching of Writing," College English 43 (November 1981), 702.

[4]Ann Berthoff, The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers (Monclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1981), p. 26.

[5]Berthoff, p. 28.

[6]Berthoff, p. 28.

[7]Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 1.

[8]Alan Brick, "First Person Singular, First Person Plural, and Exposition," College English 43 (September 1981), 509.

[9]Michel McQueen, "Black Woman, White Man," Washington Post, January 25, 1981.

[10]"U.S. Business," U.S. News and World Report, June 1981, p. 58.

[11]Jack Magarell, "Today's Students, Especially Women, More Materialistic," Chronicle of Higher Education, January 28, 1980.

[12]David Tedlock, "The Case Approach to Composition," College Composition and Communication 32 (October 1982), 255.